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ABSTRACT

Discussion of problems associated with designing instructional programs for rural, sparsely populated school districts is illustrated with examples of educational planning in Jefferson County, Florida. The county is characterized by a diminishing agrarian economy, poverty, a 75% black school enrollment, and educational disadvantagement. Factors to be considered in planning are described as fourfold: nature of population, continuum of needs (determined by kinds of needs and number of levels on which each must be met), parameters of needs (determined by size of group), and availability of resources. Need for preventive rather than remedial programs is stressed. Described is the county's Special Needs Resource Room Program in the primary grades, the program for educable mentally retarded individuals, and planning for secondary level educationally disadvantaged students. Overall, educational planning in rural areas is said to involve need appraisal and ordering, strategy development, matching resources to strategies without duplication, developing multi-county solutions to low-incident exceptionality problems and inservice teacher education, securing supplementary State and community agency services, and assessing effectiveness of programs. (KW)

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# Designing Instructional Programs in a Sparsely Populated District

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# DESIGNING INSTRUCTIONAL PROGRAMS IN A SPARSELY-POPULATED DISTRICT

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Designing Instructional Programs in a Sparsely Populated District

I am here today to talk with you about some of the problems associated with designing instructional programs for rural, sparsely populated school districts. In doing this, I must preface my further statements by indicating that problems found in small, rural districts are of the same kind as those found in urban districts, and only differ in magnitude or extent. The most pressing concern in planning instructional programs is meeting the general and exceptional needs of children in their education. Since school districts differ in their character and composition, the approaches that educational planners must use vary in relationship to the specific needs found in the individual districts.

One area where differences between districts may occur is in the incident rates of handicapping exceptionalities and special compensatory needs. Because all population characteristics are not evenly distributed over the geography of a state, a particular area or district may tend to accumulate more of a certain characteristic than another. This is largely due to geographic, economic and social factors. While geography, economy, or socio-cultural factors do not produce handicaps such as mental retardation or specific learning disabilities, they do establish conditions that may influence the frequency of such handicaps.

My district, Jefferson County, Florida, is a reasonable example of how unusual population characteristics can accumulate to produce a configuration of geographic, economic, and socio-cultural factors that affect the incidence rates of special needs. Jefferson is an atypical Florida county. Rather than growing, the population has decreased about 8% in the past ten years. The racial composition is about 60% non-white with the public schools having a 75% black student enrollment.

The standard of living, founded on a diminishing agrarian economy, is helping to perpetuate a classic poverty cycle. Another interesting aspect of the population is the age distribution. Since economic opportunities are very limited in the county, many producer-aged residents are forced to leave the area in search of employment elsewhere. Often, these persons send their children home to live with relatives. As a result, the population has a disproportionately large number of children and old-aged residents, especially among the black population. This age factor has an impact on local politics and on child-rearing practices. According to the 1960 census, the average number of grades completed by the non-white population 25 years of age and over was 4.8 years. Even if school achievement were commensurate with the number of grades completed, the typical resident in this sample would be barely above the level of functional literacy.

Economic and socio-cultural factors have a definite impact on human development. Until recently, many impoverished, expectant mothers had no pre- or postnatal care. Home deliveries of children by non-qualified persons were frequent. Often times such children were never seen by a

physician until they reached school age. Protein deficient diets which negatively affect proper growth and development were widespread. It is suspected that these conditions have contributed to a higher than anticipated prevalency of mental retardation and specific learning disabilities. I am pleased to report that health and nutrition conditions are steadily improving in Jefferson County. But it must be remembered that there is a five-year lag between the improvement of prenatal care and its infulence on children entering school.

Child-rearing practices found in Jefferson County are a marked departure from what is found in middle class homes. The sensory and language stimulation, the need to achieve, and the expectation for success in life which middle-class preschoolers receive, too often are lacking in the early childhood experiences of Jefferson County youngsters. Evidence of this can be seen in the 60% of the school population which can be considered educationally disadvantaged by ESEA Title I criteria.

Such factors present a special challenge to teachers and educational planners. In planning programs, a small, rural school district such as Jefferson County must consider:

* the nature of the population to be served,
* the continuum of needs within the population,
* the parameters of varying needs within the continuum, and
* the availability of and contingencies upon resources to meet those needs.

Determining the nature of the population to be served involves such data as its size, composition, and general distribution. In terms of the community it means assessing general family structure, educational backgrounds, economic status, health conditions, community expectations, and job opportunities.

The continuum of needs within a population is determined by the number of different kinds of needs to be met and the number of levels involved in meeting each kind. The parameters of varying needs within the continuum are determined by the size of the group having a particular need.

Resources, such as state and federal funds, often have a specific target population for which to be used. ESEA Title I funding, earmarked for the disadvantaged, is a good example. Planners must know in advance what contingencies are placed on activities that may be conducted through available resources.

Since a school district's resources are always limited, planners must determine that optimal mix of resources which support activities that:

* meet high priority needs,

* meet quality as well as quantity criteria, and

* have system integrity in their inter-relatedness to each other.

An optimal mix can be achieved only if planners develop more than one possible strategy for meeting each high priority need, and then select the combination of alternatives that serves the most needs at a desired quality level.

If small school districts are to be successful in meeting the varying needs of students, general education, compensatory education, special education, and pupil services must blend their strategies and activities along a continuum of needs. In doing so, activities should be designed to meet specific needs without unnecessary duplication of effort between activities. As often as possible, the aims of programs should be preventive rather than remedial in nature.

Until last year in Jefferson County, the responsibility for planning and operating special education, compensatory education, and pupil service programs was distributed among several persons on the central office staff, none of whom had training or experience in exceptional child education. Since this responsibility was not their primary function in the local system of education, it consistently took secondary priority under other concerns. While being very competent in their primary areas of responsibility, these persons were not experienced in dealing with the different classifications of exceptionalities or familiar with the educational needs or potentialities of exceptional children. These factors had a definite influence on the nature and philosophy of programs provided for exceptional and disadvantaged children. At the elementary level, resource rooms were used to serve all exceptionalities. No adopted curriculum was used for any exceptionality. One of the outstanding problems associated with the resource room program was that students were served only on a part-time basis. The elementary schools in Jefferson County are departmentalized for team teaching purposes. A typical special education child, say an EMR, would go to special education for two hours during the day. When he got back to the other classrooms, he was automatically stamped as a "special ed. kid" which somehow signified that those other teachers did not have to do much for him. So in the final analysis it turned out that what was every teacher's responsibility to educate became almost nobody's responsibility. The value of special education in this type of situation is rather dubious. Articulation in that special education strategy was non-existent.

The problems associated with compensatory education or ESEA Title I programming were similar. Programs provided included remedial reading for intermediate grades, speech therapy, psychological services, health services, and classroom aides. The entire orientation of the program was remedial in nature, while no attempt was made at the diagnosis of and intervention into the problems of disadvantaged children at the primary level. In other words, the apparent philosophy was to let problems occur, then treat them if you can--rather than trying to prevent the occurrence of problems or lessening

their potential severity.

The Department of Education in Florida is liberal in the amount of decision making latitude used by districts in program planning. This policy pressures the districts to develop leadership from within the school system rather than the State trying to develop programs from afar. If leadership is not adequate in some areas, those areas tend to get out of line with respect to purpose and accpmplishment. Such was the case in Jefferson County with respect to special education, and compensatory education. Last year a new central office staff position was created. The position was for a director of special programs and services. This person's responsibilities included the coordination of special education, compensatory education, pupil services, and all state and federal projects related thereto. The director of special programs and services was given the perogative to redesign all the programs to the extent that funds and the law would allow. That he did.

Beginning with a variety of surveys for incident rates, age-grade distributions, achievement test data, economic information, etc., small groups were formed to consider many problems. The central question to which the groups addressed themselves was, "Given a school district with this set of characteristics and the available resources, what activities will meet the widest range of student needs at the desired quality level?" From the conclusions made by the various groups, the director of special programs devised several possible activities that could be provided for each kind of identified special student need. From these alternatives, a final program design was developed. All projects written in the county reflected that program design.

The strategies, programs, and activities provided in a school district comprise an interactive and interdependent system or network. A change in one element of the system automatically produces changes in other elements. Planners must anticipate these reactions before changes are initiated. It should be done in the same way a billiards player anticipates blank-shots and splits.

This notion can best be illustrated by example:

Being a small county adjoining another county containing two universities, a community college, and a technical school, nearly half of Jefferson County teachers are the wives of college students. This means that Jefferson has a constant influx of teachers not acquainted with local educational problems. In the past when these teachers were put into the classroom, they soon discovered that the needs and problems of their students were a marked departure from what their professional preparation had equipped them to work with. Too often they hastily concluded that since they were not taught how to teach children with such a variety of educational differences, surely something must be wrong with the children. And in those glorious words known to all special educators came the cliché, "Wow, if something is really wrong with these kids, they belong in special education, not my class! How soon can you take them?"

Needless to say, the over-referral of children to the psychologist for possible special education placement was radically out of proportion to the need. For example, two years ago a new teacher who had done her student teaching in an upper-middle-class elementary school had referred 26 of her 29 first graders to the psychologist by the end of the second week of the school year.

To reduce the over-referrals and to meet a greater range of student needs in the primary grades, a specially designed program aimed at children with learning problems (primarily associated with disadvantaged backgrounds) was introduced this year. Using ESEA, Title I funds, special need resource rooms were put at each grade level K-3. The children that teachers suspect as having "possible intellectual or learning disabilities" are referred there, not directly to special education. EMR and SLD referrals are made from these resource rooms. In this more controlled setting, better qualified teachers working in conjunction with service personnel are able to observe and evaluate children who may eventually enter a special education program. This procedure facilitates the use of a multiple criteria definition in determining which children are placed into an EMR program. The referral rate of children in grades K-3 has been cut in half.

The Special Needs Resource Room Program is not just an adjunct to special education, but rather a separate and distinct program in its own right. All participants are screened before admission, and are pre- and post-tested over set program objectives based on the developmental needs of disadvantaged children. Activities of the program include identification, classification, comparisons, relationships, self and group identity, role playing, body awareness, and visual motor integration. Some of the benefits of this program are:

* a reduced referral rate of children to special education programs,
* the psychologist has time to do more for children than just test them,
* the elementary schools are now meeting a wider range of student needs than before,
* there is a functional buffer program between general and special education programs, and
* the educational program components have increased compatibility and integrity in their interrelatedness to each other.

In addition, it is hoped that the Special Need Resource Room Program may reduce the number of children needing remedial reading in the intermediate grades, but it will be two or three years before that possibility can be evaluated.

Jefferson now has an EMR program in grades K-8. Since handicapping conditions are generally compounded by cultural differences in Jefferson, the determination and classification of EMR placements is an extended and careful process. Potential EMR students in grades K-1 are served in a part-time class. Self-contained EMR classes begin at grade 2. This programming arrangement is used to reduce the possibility of inappropriate EMR placements.

Jefferson is now planning a senior high EMR program for grades 9-12. The program will be strongly vocational in nature with a work-experience aim as a major consideration. Some of the vocational skills planned for the program are:

* building and home maintenance
* horticulture and landscaping
* fiberglass crafts
* short order cooking
* commercial baking
* nursing home assistance
* infant/child care
* laundry, and
* hotel/motel services

Another group of students with special needs for whom planning is essential is the secondary level educationally disadvantaged. School desegregation and the pairing of grades in Jefferson County schools placed many disadvantaged secondary students in a school situation where the aims of the curriculum were inappropriate for their needs and unrealistic with respect to their achievement.

For example, the traditional college prep curriculum in senior high English was neither appropriate nor motivating to disadvantaged students. In fact, for students reading three or more grade levels below their grade placement, who have poor motivation and attendance histories, such an inappropriate curriculum spells their failure before they walk into the first class. Frustration and dissatisfaction with school was a common characteristic of such students. This frustration was often expressed in truancy, inappropriate classroom behaviors, and other discipline problems which eventually resulted in the suspension of students and loss of attendance funds to the school.

In response to this problem, curriculum change was necessary to meet a wider range of student needs. Three curriculum teams worked for six weeks

this past summer developing functional curriculum modules for high-risk students. Paid from ESEA Title I funds, these teams developed semi-individualized programs in communications, math, and science. In all three programs emphasis is placed on the acquisition of basic skills and the functional application of those skills to everyday living demands. The programs and their related materials are geared toward low reading levels. High interest, low reading level materials and classroom simulations are important features of these programs. Those skills especially associated with vocational pursuits are of primary concern.

Some of the benefits of this type of programming include:

* the increased ability of the secondary curriculum to meet a wider range of student needs,

* increased compatability between academic program orientation and the educational necessities associated with vocational programming, and

* some reduction in discipline problems.

In working to bring about changes in programming and curriculum, there are many obstacles to be overcome. For this reason, planners and organizers must rely on group processes to obtain the desired outcomes. When planning is in progress, teachers, principals, parents, community groups, consultants, and involved agencies should all have inputs at one stage or another. The needs and purposes for change must be understood and appreciated by those who must implement and experience change. Otherwise, the likelihood of smooth and effective change is diminished.

In rural, sparsely populated districts, program operation for the educable mentally retarded and the speech disabled are within feasibility limits. But lower incident exceptionalities (e.g., for the trainable, deaf, visually impaired, etc.) educational programming must be done on a multi-district basis. When programming crosses district boundaries mutuality of planning becomes a critical concern. Problems that must be jointly solved by participating districts are: the standardization of procedures, transportation, facilities, services, finances, and the selection of personnel. The role of the state educational agency or Department of Education in facilitating program development and solving multi-district problems may be central to the success or failure of a multi-district endeavor.

In forming multi-district program agreements, the agreemants made should be perpetuated through time as need dictates and beyond the political dynamics of changes in school administrations. All agreements should be based on the needs of the target population first, on the services to the multi-district area second, and on the convenience to individual districts third. Since participating districts are mutually dependent upon each other in such arrangements, districts must be united in such

a way as to prevent the arbitrary withdrawal of or domination by a single district. Again, the Department of Education has an important leadership role to play in the formation of program agreements, the setting of standards, and the regulation of financing.

Jefferson now participates in multi-county school center and itinerant specialist programs to meet the needs of the trainable, deaf, and visually impaired students residing in its attendance area.

Aside from state and federal funds used to establish and maintain programs for special student needs, small, rural districts must carefully identify, select, and utilize the services that agencies and institutions in the area can provide for eligible students. State and local agencies, charitable organizations, and universities provide many services to children and their families. The costs for such services are often based on the user's ability to pay. The school district can and should play a helping role as liasion liasion between the needy and the provider of services.

Vocational rehabilitation and social work agencies are frequently used by small school districts. Since small, rural districts can rarely afford social work services, the case-work assistance provided by such agencies is valuable. Whether working with socially maladjusted youth, the retarded, or the physically handicapped, these agencies can do much to help fill in the gaps between home, school, and community. The services that may be obtained from university centers are important resources too. Their special clinics and activities operated in the summer for handicapped children certainly augment regular school programs. The leadership role played by local districts in securing services for its students is an important and often neglected responsibility.

Another element of program planning that should be considered is that of research; research to help solve problems and test ideas generated at the local level. A county having an atypical population, such as Jefferson, affords some unique opportunities to develop and test new or specialized methods. In a population where cultural differences often disguise or imitate some handicapping conditions (MR, ED, SLD handicaps), the development and use of specialized identification and intervention procedures are important to the operation and quality of programs for those handicaps. the possible use of ESEA Title III funds is being considered for that purpose now in Jefferson.

ESEA Title VI is another important resource for testing program ideas for the handicapped.

To illustrate some of the changes that have and are occurring in educational planning in Jefferson County, I brought along some transparencies.

As you can see in the first chart, exceptional children in 1969-70 were served only in the elementary grades. The service was provided in varying exceptionalities part-time classes which meant that children were

served on a limited basis. Teachers had to plan activities for two or three exceptionality groups during the day which was an unreasonable demand to make on a teacher. Low incident exceptional children such as the deaf, were at a definite disadvantage because the teachers were not trained to serve those exceptionalities and it was not economically feasible for a county to hire a teacher for just one or two children.

The only compensatory program was remedial reading which served five different grade levels.

In chart number two, you can see that things improved a little last year. The number of varying exceptionality part-time classes was reduced. Self-contained EMR classes began operation in grades 5-8. A trainable class was started for upper primary-lower intermediate level children. Still much more was needed for MR children but programs were at least moving in a direction commensurate with the need. In addition, a school health service program was started last year, and Jefferson began participation in a multi-district program for the deaf and hard of hearing.

This year more changes are evident. The varying exceptionalities approach is used in only two grades, K-1, for the purpose already mentioned. The EMR program is operating in seven grade levels. Visually impaired children are served by a multi-district itinerant specialist program. The Special Needs Resource Room Program is serving disadvantaged children in the primary grades. The remedial reading program now serves seven grade levels and has been individualized. The functional curriculum program is serving about 250 students in secondary grades.

Chart four should give you a fair idea of what Jefferson's program plans are for next year. A complete, thirteen-year EMR program is our goal for 1972. Primary and intermediate level trainable children will be served in the county while older trainable youth will participate in a multi-district program. A cooperative agreement between Jefferson County and Vocational Rehabilitation will be a tremendous service to senior high level exceptional youth with respect to occupational opportunities. In 1973-73, Jefferson hopes to initiate programs for SLD youngsters in grades 2-4. In addition, plans are now underway to begin a program for socially maladjusted youth in grades 8-12.

In spite of the growth in the areas you have seen, the objectives of the Director of Special Programs and Services do not include the construction of a mini-empire; but rather it represents a dedicated attempt to meet the educational needs of all children. Nearly 30% of the student body in Jefferson County directly benefit from the programs I have described. All other children indirectly benefit from the existence of such programming.

In summary, if you are an educational planner for special programs and services in a small, rural, sparsely populated district you must:

* identify, appraise, and order the needs of the students in your district,

* develop strategies for meeting those needs,

* match your resources to the strategies without duplication or incompatibility,

* develop multi-county solutions to low incident exceptionality problems including programs for children and inservice training for their teachers,

* secure services provided by community and state agencies to supplement or complement your programs, and

* ultimately, develop procedures for assessing the efficiency and effectiveness of your programs.

The persisting problems that you must continuously face are limited resources, pupil transportation, recruitment of competent personnel, and procedural delays. The only way to combat these persisting problems is with persistence of your own.

APPENDIX

CHART I

JEFFERSON COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS

SPECIAL PROGRAMS AND SERVICES

1969-1970

| PROGRAM | GRADE LEVELS | | | | | | | | | | | | | FUNDS |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | K | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 | |
| VARYING EXCEPTIONALITIES | ▨ | ▨ | ▨ | ▨ | ▨ | ▨ | ▨ | ⁘ | ⁘ | ⁘ | ⁘ | ⁘ | ⁘ | STATE |
| SPEECH THERAPY | ▨ | ▨ | ▨ | ▨ | ▨ | ▨ | ▨ | ▨ | ▨ | ▨ | ▨ | ▨ | ▨ | ESEA I |
| REMEDIAL READING | | | ▨ | ▨ | ▨ | ▨ | ▨ | ⁘ | ⁘ | | | | | ESEA I |
| PSYCHOLOGICAL SERVICES | ▨ | ▨ | ▨ | ▨ | ▨ | ▨ | ▨ | ▨ | ▨ | ▨ | ▨ | ▨ | ▨ | ESEA I |
| GUIDANCE SERVICES | ⁘ | ⁘ | ⁘ | ⁘ | ⁘ | ⁘ | ⁘ | ▨ | ▨ | ▨ | ▨ | ▨ | ▨ | STATE |

▨ PROGRAM PROVIDED

⁘ PROGRAM NEEDED

▨ SERVICE PROVIDED AS NEEDED

CHART II

JEFFERSON COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS

SPECIAL PROGRAMS AND SERVICES

1970-1971

| PROGRAM | GRADE LEVELS | | | | | | | | | | | | | FUNDS |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | K | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 | |
| VARYING EXCEPTIONALITIES | | | | | | | | | | | | | | STATE |
| EDUCABLE MR | | | | | | | | | | | | | | STATE |
| TRAINABLE MR | | | | | | | | | | | | | | STATE |
| SPEECH THERAPY | | | | | | | | | | | | | | ESEA I |
| DEAF/HARD OF HEARING | | | | | | | | | | | | | | ESEA VI |
| REMEDIAL READING | | | | | | | | | | | | | | ESEA I |
| PSYCHOLOGICAL SERVICES | | | | | | | | | | | | | | ESEA I |
| GUIDANCE SERVICES | | | | | | | | | | | | | | STATE |
| HEALTH SERVICES | | | | | | | | | | | | | | ESEA I |

PROGRAM PROVIDED

PROGRAM NEEDED

SERVICE PROVIDED AS NEEDED

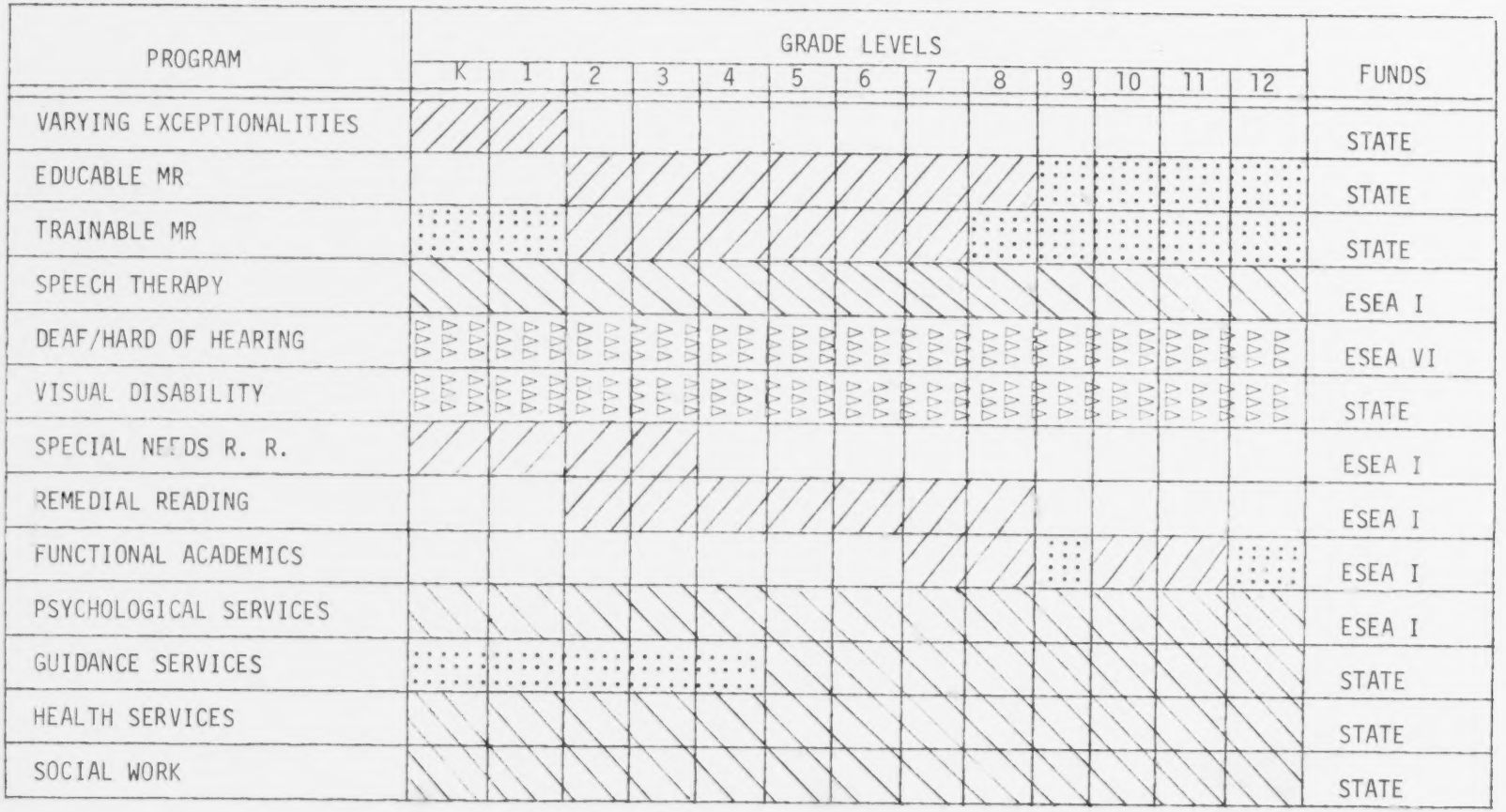
MULTI-DISTRICT PROGRAM PARTICIPATION

CHART III

JEFFERSON COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS

SPECIAL PROGRAMS AND SERVICES

1971-1972




PROGRAM PROVIDED

PROGRAM NEEDED

SERVICE PROVIDED AS NEEDED

MULTI-DISTRICT PROGRAM PARTICIPATION

CHART IV

JEFFERSON COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS
SPECIAL PROGRAMS AND SERVICES

1972-1973